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ABSTRACT

"American Visions" is a freshman-level survey course offered by the Department of History as part of Butler University's core curriculum. The course is built around three primary contextual considerations: high culture, popular culture, and community culture. The high culture approach is designed to introduce students to major systems of thought that have flourished in American history. The popular cultural approach explores how the ideas of high culture are developed, recorded, transmitted, and popularized for mass audiences. The community culture approach is takes advantage of Butler University's urban location in Indianapolis (Indiana) by using the resources of the city to illustrate themes of urbanism and urban populations. The course normally begins with topics in geography that suggest differing patterns of land use; this is followed by a study of styles of architecture commonly found in those areas. The next step is the assignment of individual projects. Students are asked to select an artifact of the colonial or revolutionary period and to perform three tasks: describe its physical features; discuss the underlying idea or ideas that its creator was seeking to express; and assess the ways these ideas fit within the larger context of the course. Upon completion of the project, students are required to give 5-minute oral reports and present a three- to five-page paper as a validation of the effort the student has provided. A syllabus describing the student project is provided. (JMC)

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# Doing the Humanities: The Use of Undergraduate Classroom Humanities Research Projects

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*Presented at the University of Florida*
*National Conference on Successful College Teaching and Administration*
*Orlando, Florida, March 1-4, 1992*

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**Doing the Humanities: The Use of Undergraduate Classroom Humanities Research Projects**

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The Context. Much of the current discourse about change and improvement in collegiate undergraduate classroom instruction focuses, in various ways, upon the investigation, implementation, and evaluation of alternatives to lecture/discussion methods. The focus is understandable. Lecture/discussion is still the most widely practiced method on many campuses, and was the principal model for teaching which large numbers of college faculty observed during their own undergraduate careers. It's the model we use in many academic meetings, this one included.

But it's not the only method available. At least since the rise of the research seminar in the nineteenth century German universities, and the subsequent adoption of the seminar method into American graduate instruction at the turn of the 20th century, the concept of instruction built around student projects has been an accepted instructional alternative.

In more recent years, moreover, we have seen increased discussion of ways by which graduate research methods can be adapted to undergraduate instruction. The sciences have often led the charge. Making use of institutional laboratories, they have sought to explain the methodologies of their disciplines -- and perhaps spark student interest -- by developing opportunities for individual student projects.

Such projects are typically provided to upperclassmen who have completed required sequences of introductory courses, and often reflect the particular research interests of the instructor. The papers and poster panel exhibits offered at many undergraduate student research conferences suggest a wide range of current activity.

Adapting to the Humanities. The approach, however, has been less used in the humanities. There it most commonly remains reserved for graduate level instruction, particularly in separate seminar sections. One need only review the catalogs of many humanities graduate programs to confirm the continued appeal of lecture and discussion in introductory and core curriculum courses.

One is most likely to find emphasis upon individual projects in the omnipresent term paper. A review of course syllabi files in many institutions will reveal its appeal. But a review of those same files will reveal that, unless incorporated into some form of writing-intensive system, it is most often treated as an outside project that is seldom mentioned or treated during the instructional meetings of the course.

This need not be the case. It is possible, in part by drawing upon the insights of undergraduate science instruction, to incorporate student projects into the body of the course and thus afford excellent alternatives to lecture/discussion courses.

In keeping with this conference's call, which stressed practical, applied orientations, I'd like to present my suggestions in the context of the specific course where my colleagues and I have developed our approach: *American Visions*.

A Course Outline. First, let me discuss the course. *American Visions* is a freshman level course offered by the Department of History as part of Butler University's current core curriculum. Butler's core presupposes two levels of courses. One is a series of common courses such as composition and public speaking, which are required of all students. The second is a series of distribution requirements, often discipline specific, in the five areas of mathematics, laboratory science, social science, fine arts, and the humanities.

This division has had the interesting effect of causing us to create an atypical approach to the survey course. Instead of the two semester survey presupposed in most textbooks, we offer two independent courses. One, *Main Themes in American Politics*, is presented as an option in social science; the other, *American Visions*, is an option in humanities. Students whose major field lies within one of the five areas are not required to take the distribution course in that area.

As we have developed the course, *American Visions* is built around three primary contextual considerations -- high, popular, and community culture. Let me describe each.

Our high cultural approach is designed to introduce students to major systems of thought that have flourished in American history. We use 17th century Puritanism, 18th century Enlightened thought, 19th century Romanticism, and 20th century modernism as our four basic structures. For each we invite the student to join in exploring the sources of information, the methods of thought, and the ensuing world views that the system under consideration articulated. Then, in keeping with our humanities focus, we ask a key question of the human condition by inquiring how each world view provides a place, or places, for humanity. The approach also allows us to promote a "lifetime learning" focus by asking at the end of the course if a post-modern world view has emerged, or is likely to emerge during the students' lifetimes.

Our popular cultural approach, which is fitted within the foregoing, is designed to explore how the ideas of high culture are developed, recorded, transmitted, and popularized for mass audiences. Here two elements are crucial. One is the emphasis upon methods of delivery, from sermons and almanacs to dime novels and cinema. The other is an emphasis upon individual creativity, in which we use particular products of creative imagination to illustrate and exemplify the arguments being offered.

Finally, our community cultural approach is designed to take advantage of our urban location in Indianapolis by using the resources of the city to illustrate much of the foregoing. This permits us to place emphasis upon themes of urbanism and urban populations, and to stress urban sites and sources in the course.

Throughout, we take advantage of the visions theme. In each of the high cultural approaches we explore the utopian and dystopian possibilities of the world view under consideration. In each of the popular cultural approaches we strive to include examples from art, architecture, landscape planning, and other fields where it is possible to use audio visual materials to supplement the spoken and written word.

The course is a freshman survey, and as such it necessarily picks and chooses carefully. When a total of only 35 hours of actual instructional time is involved, with students whose average combined SAT scores is about 1030, one cannot expect to do more than briefly introduce, and perhaps spark some interest in, many topics.

Doing the Humanities. Recognizing this, and striving to avoid some of the charges of superficiality that attach to many surveys, we made the decision to put special stress upon methodology. In effect, we ask how you "do" the humanities. It's an interesting challenge, because many students arrive with pencils poised above paper merely to record the words and sentences they expect to find on examinations.

The course first does this by taking a series of artifacts of the colonial and revolutionary periods and showing how they can be used to suggest course themes. We normally begin with topics in geography that suggest differing patterns of land use. By using transparencies of the archetypal New England town, the southern tidewater plantation, and the compromises between these two visions embodied in the Land Ordinance of 1785, we are able to suggest ways that order imposed upon the landscape visually reflects deeply held visions of real and ideal community.

We next make use of styles of architecture commonly found in these areas. Again slides and transparencies can be employed to suggest the opposing features of the colonial era: the architecture of memory of the 17th century and the architecture of design books of the 18th century. Then each of these can be contrasted with the new styles that early national builders used to embody the national experience, contrasting the Greek and the Roman revivals as a means of contrasting the democratic and republican alternatives of that era.

These architectural topics need to be presented visually in class because the community in which Butler is located possesses no surviving examples. Once we reach the 19th century, however, we start to find visually striking locations that now permit us to anchor discussion in an observable local environment.

Here the key location is the nearby Crown Hill Cemetery. As American Studies students know, the appearance of the Mount Auburn style of design captured the public imagination after 1831, producing a host of imitators across the country. Cemeteries are particularly good means of anchoring discussion because they incorporate elements of landscape planning (from plantings to road plans), of architecture (in chapels, gates, and mausoleums), or art (particularly in sculpture and stained glass), and occasionally in folklore (notably ghost stories). All, in short, are features that can be used to illustrate the Romantic impulse in America.

[The approach also offers the interesting possibility of field trips, although in our own case the troubling problem of liability insurance has prevented our exercising this option.]

Assigning the Project. At this stage in our semester we normally move to assignment of the actual individual projects. The first step in this process is a formal assignment sheet. (A copy is attached as appendix one). In the sheet we attempt to review a number of the key features that we have found are of most significance to us.

Most important, we ask the student to select an artifact that will permit them to perform three tasks:
-- first, a description of its physical features;
-- second, a discussion of the underlying idea or ideas that its creator(s) were seeking to express, and;
-- third, an assessment of the ways these ideas fit within the larger context of the course.

We urge the students to seek an artifact that is accessible, and we stress the need to avoid threats to safety or dignity. Most important, we stress the need to think in terms of artifacts that fit within the course context. Experience taught us that, because we often discuss the European and/or African origins of many ideas and concepts, students often are tempted to ignore our North American focus.

Far more often, however, we discover that many freshmen are troubled by the requirement that they make the selection. A number clearly would prefer to be given an assignment (an alternative that we found in the first year is a one way ticket to endless questions about "what do you want me to do next?")

As an alternative we normally build into the course several additional periods in which readings and lectures are used to present several types of artifact that offer the student models upon which they might build. Let me describe our most successful.

First, we have excellent success by describing ways that community churches can be evaluated. Probably because their home town church has been a focus of many youth and family activities, students will respond well to a challenge to record and report its physical setting.

Second, we have excellent success with town plans. Indiana and its neighboring states, from which many of our students come,is an area of small towns, many with a distinctive court house square pattern that admits of almost infinite variations. Again the element of familiarity contributes to student confidence.

Finally, we have had some success with studies of historic buildings. The materials of the Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana, which we distribute to each student, offer an excellent introduction to architectural style and decoration. Indianapolis, with a strong neighborhood presence and a number of well preserved historic districts offers a ready laboratory for the study of buildings and streetscapes.

It also proves useful to provide samples of student work provided in past semesters. Many student reports are accompanied by photographs, slides, or videotapes (increasingly common as inexpensive camcorders become available), and saving or copying outstanding examples that can be shown is a good way to provide guidance. A particularly good case in point was student report that traced the transition from realistic to impressionistic art in local tombstone carving and represented this with accompanying photographs -- using the contrast to highlight the differences of 19th and 20th century art.

We have, frankly, had less success in some other areas. Painting and sculpture rarely produce good commentary, probably in part because the structure of our core curriculum stresses arts in performance. We have also found that most students using antiques, particularly family artifacts, have trouble transcending the associational meanings of the object to discuss its larger context. Family loyalty, in short, runs strong.

Presenting the Project. Important as the selection and review of a project may be, its particular role in American Visions is also important. We normally set aside the next to last week of the course to allow students to give five minute oral reports (accompanied, as appropriate by audio-visuals). [Butler limits its section sizes to thirty, permitting direct instructor comment. However, even larger sections could achieve much the same with breakout groups and peer group evaluation.]

At a time when "writing' across the curriculum is fashionable, we find this idea of "speaking" across the course to be an interesting variant that draws upon the core speech requirement and that assures that even the most reticent of students will be able to say they recited in class. The talks also offer the opportunity to give advice about weaknesses in organization and argument that the student can incorporate into the ensuing written project report -- in effect offering the opportunity for revisions so important in much writing intensive discourse.

The ensuing paper, usually three to five pages in length, is the final validation of the effort the student has provided. When presented, it means that a student has gone through many of the key steps in undergraduate research, and can leave the course with the confidence they have done the humanities. I recommend it as a basis for departure in your own programs.

## Appendix -- Course Syllabus Description

The "Project": History is, in part, a search for sources -- for the records of the past that form the building blocks of our interpretations of the human experience and the human condition. Many of these records are in the form of written documents. But other records can be the physical artifacts that we inherit from earlier generations. Like their written counterparts, artifacts are the product of human thought and imagination, and like their written counterparts, they are windows into past worlds -- and sources that illuminate ideas, values, and judgments which are relevant to our course.

Surprisingly, most historians have paid little attention to artifacts until very recently. The discipline traditionally concerned itself with print and manuscript sources, and history courses often emphasize topics that can be analyzed through the written word. Today, however, there is a growing interest in the uses to which we can put art, archaeology, architecture, geography, and a host of other visible sources of America's visions.

Your job in the "project" will be to select one example of these artifacts. Pick a painting, a book, a building, a street plan, or some other tangible reflection of the American vision(s). Then study with the goal of:

-- describing the artifact, noting the features that an informed observer would point out in explaining its significance, and,

-- explaining the significance of the artifact in illustrating the values, ideas, and attitudes of the person(s) who created it, and,

-- placing the artifact in the context of the themes and topics we've discussed in the course.

It's perfectly all right to select a topic that flows from one of our lectures or discussions; it's also all right to branch out on your own. Obviously you should pick an object in the American context (Europe and the third world are no-no's). Please pick a topic that is accessible to you, and that will allow you to show off to advantage. Do not pick a topic that imposes any risks to your safety or dignity. If in doubt, check with me before you start your research.

During the early lectures and discussions in American Visions, I'll work to develop your skills in handling this type of material. Several of the chapters in Davidson offer useful sample of the ways to approach this kind of topic. They also serve as a reminder that it's often necessary to use the library to help you put your particular object in its proper historical context.

I will ask you to report twice about your project. The first report will be a brief (2 to 5 minute) oral presentation in class about the twelfth week of the semester. There you should identify your artifact (illustrations are welcome, but are not required) and answer the three key questions of description and explanation noted above. The second report will be a written report (1 to 3 typewritten pages, although I will accept a legible manuscript if you have no access to a typewriter or word processor) in which you present your report for a grade. I will grade the report in the same way that I grade essay examinations.

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